

Remarks by Bishop John H. Ricard
for the
Governor's Climate Change Summit
Miami — June 25, 2008

Thank you, Governor Crist, for your outstanding and consistent leadership on the important issue of the environment. And I am grateful that you have invited me to offer a few words at this Climate Change Summit.

In my remarks, I will summarize how the Catholic community approaches the climate change issue and share some of our practical efforts and public policy priorities at the state and national levels. I hope these contributions will encourage further discussion about how each of us can tread more lightly on this increasingly stressed planet. By doing so, we can demonstrate more concretely our love for God's creation and for our neighbor.

Over fifteen years ago, the Florida Catholic Conference, the voice of the Florida bishops in Tallahassee, issued a statement on environmental concerns. Just two years ago, our state Catholic conference offered a commentary on both climate change and the problem of mercury emanating from coal-fired power plants, especially as mercury makes its way into our water systems and ultimately impacts the unborn and small children. These concerns remain priorities for us.

But in reality, our environmental awareness and engagement is as old as our Judeo-Christian roots. From the creation stories in Genesis to Pope Benedict XVI's powerful words in his World Day of Peace message this past January — where he reminded us “that God the Creator has given us [this earth] to inhabit with creativity and responsibility”—the Church has tried to live up to the call to be faithful stewards of God's marvelous gift of creation.

As the bishops noted in our statement *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good*:

At its core, global climate change is not about economic theory or political platforms, nor about partisan advantage or interest group pressures. It is about the future of God's creation and the one human family. It is about protecting both "the human environment" and the natural environment. It is about our human stewardship of God's creation and our responsibility to those who come after us.

We bishops are not experts in the science of climate change nor in public policy solutions. Nonetheless, we accept the broad scientific consensus that climate change is real and is caused primarily by human activity. Therefore, the virtue of prudence dictates that even in the face of some uncertainty (and today the only remaining uncertainty is the severity of climate change impacts) we still have an obligation to act.

At the same time, we will not shy away from our responsibility to share our teaching and experience in the public arena. Whether it is through our Catholic Charities agencies assisting Floridians recovering from hurricanes or the relief and development work of Catholic Relief Services around the world, we know that climate change can exacerbate poverty by adding an additional stress factor for the poorest people at home and abroad. As Bishop Thomas Wenski of Orlando, speaking as chairman of the U.S. Catholic Bishop's Committee on International Policy said in a letter to U.S. Senators just this month, "the real inconvenient truth is that those who contribute the least to climate change will be affected the most and have the least capacity to cope or escape."

So in the public policy arena, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops through its Environmental Justice Program believes that properly structured climate change policy can do two things at once: create incentives to reduce emissions (mitigation) and provide revenue to offset costs associated with higher energy bills, helping workers transition out of impacted industries at home and assisting the poorest people around the world deal with the impacts of a changing climate (adaptation). With other religious partners, the USCCB was successful in sharing this perspective and structuring the recently debated Lieberman-Warner climate change bill in just this way.

This approach highlights an old fashioned notion that needs to be more fully embraced if we are to confront the problem of climate change more honestly: the common good. It may be that listening to the voice of the earth, as Pope Benedict has said, will encourage a greater understanding of the common good and a greater willingness to demonstrate real solidarity with our brothers and sisters around the world so that the earth's resources may be shared more equitably.

At a practical level, we are working to educate and activate our own community by encouraging greater attention to climate change by our institutions, parishes and families.

The Catholic Coalition on Climate Change is a broad-based partnership guided by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and nearly a dozen national Catholic institutions. It recently awarded grants to 11 national Catholic organizations that will help them integrate a Catholic approach to climate change education and advocacy activities into their ongoing programs.

Early in the fall, the coalition, with assistance from the USCCB, will launch an ambitious campaign linking the charismatic figure of St. Francis of Assisi, with his deep passion for the poor and for the earth, with today's environmental challenges, especially climate change. While the campaign is still in the design phase, we will encourage U.S. Catholics and Catholic institutions to embrace a renewed covenant with the earth and with one another. We will promote prayerful consideration of how our lifestyles contribute to global warming, urge Catholics to learn more about the issue, suggest ways to reduce energy use and encourage greater engagement in the bishops' public policy priorities.

In Florida, we have also been very active in climate-related activities. In the spring of 2007, the Florida Catholic Conference and the Diocese of Orlando, in partnership with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change, held a day-long hearing on the science of climate change, our church teaching as it relates to the issue. A panel of stakeholders from agriculture, insurance, volunteer services and environmental science was convened to share their stories and offer advice to the bishops as they proceed with practical and public policy activities. The hearing confirmed what we already experience: that poor Floridians will suffer the most from the impacts of climate change. Two examples strike me from this dialogue:

The first has to do with agriculture. Droughts, rising sea levels and severe storms could have a devastating impact on agriculture. Migrant workers dependent on seasonal work in our fields, orchards and groves will feel these impacts more than most.

The second is donor fatigue. As our experience of 2004 demonstrated, four hurricanes in a row not only strained relief agency personnel, but also relief agency budgets. I'm proud to say that Catholics across the state responded generously, yet many of our Catholic Charities agencies still lacked the financial resources to address all of peoples' needs. Asking for donations over and over again is a difficult thing to do, especially when so many of the donors are also the victims.

As you know, Governor, that while the Red Cross and other emergency relief organizations are first on the scene when disaster strikes (and we have plenty of disasters in Florida) it is our Catholic Charities agencies and other religious organizations who are among the lead institutions in assisting struggling families over the longer term recovery process. It is because of our first hand, daily experiences assisting the immigrant and the family struggling to make ends meet at home, and the most destitute people overseas, that we also feel obligated to advocate for changes in public policy that, God willing, will one day make our charity unnecessary.

In summary, we will continue to support practical and public policy efforts to roll back the damage we are doing to the environment over the long term and insist on real relief for the poorest of God's children in the short term as we deal the moral dimensions of climate change.

Thank you for this opportunity and I look forward to our discussion.